

## The EthnoFolk Letters 6

11 March 1994  
Box 245  
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Dear George,

Belated congrats on your PhD! And who is the cute kid in the photo?

Your questions about our winter solstice parties brought recall of many good times.

Ben remembers that his parents had a fire on Solstice morning, but we can't remember just what prompted our first solstice party; maybe our being in the new far north\* just made it seem like a good idea to celebrate the ever-dying, ever-newborn sun. I have been interested in comparative mythology\religion for a long time, and the four points of the year are, as you know, *rife* with interpretation and celebration in most cultures. The idea of the returning sun after the longest night seems to deserve the chain of fires that were lit across proto-England as the sun came up. The Druid old ones smeared themselves with *woad* (a blue plant dye) on ceremonial occasions, and a feast was et.

So we drew little figures that had personal significance for each of us on our hands and faces in washable, nontoxic blue markers. Some of the figures were the rising sun, stars, evergreen trees, knots, snowflakes, birds, &c. We had a bonfire all laid in the back yard, doused it with gasoline just before the sun rose, and tossed in a match just as the edge of the sun came over the horizon. Then we sang the paganest carols we knew, like "The Holly and the Ivy," "Oh Christmas Tree," and "Here Comes the Sun." After we had baked our fronts and frozen our backsides a decently long time, we went inside and drank Hot Sloth Broth (spiced wine and/or apple cider) and ate what I had decided was nicely symbolic—round rye breads with a + in the top, annular poppyseed cake, and other (mostly round) cookies, cheese, golden mandarin oranges, and so on. After that, we would go skating, and come back to the remains of the breakfast, green pea soup, and more singing (all the Christmas carols), playing with tops (maybe we got this from Chanuka *dreidels*), and other good fun. We had a big round candle that burned all of the day, and we used it year after year. We all wore little sprig of the greenwood (from the Christmas tree) in our lapels. And a little sprig of mistletoe was hung over the doorway, too.

Although most of our solstice celebration is probably British-derived, at some point in the party I would usually tell about some of the other festivals and beliefs that were centered on the Solstice. Santa Lucia's Day, wherein the eldest daughter would wear a crown of evergreen with candles in it while bringing breakfast to the parents. Chanuka, the Feast of Lights, when lamp oil for only one day lasted for eight, until new oil arrived. Christmas, when the Baby in the manger brought light to the world. And Mithra and Adonis were also born of virgin mothers in stables at the dark of the year and were dying and everliving gods. Of course the Druids. And so on. There are *lots*. Also that the sun is the source of all life on earth, through photosynthesis and by driving the water cycle.

Somewhere I found a litany for lighting a fire that begins, "I light this fire in the presence of kith and kin, without fear or favour...." I can't remember the rest, and I haven't been able to find it since we moved to Jasper. If it ever turns up, I'll try to remember to send you a copy.\*\* Now we can't have a bonfire in the backyard (national parks regulations), so we have it in the fireplace, and we have quit painting ourselves blue—it seemed more acceptable in the 60s and 70s, somehow—and our party seems more "normal," more staid, less pagan. But no less a grouping of the clan of friends and family in knowing that even though the coldest, toughest part of the year is just coming, the sun will rise a little earlier each day, with increasing warmth. We, like the old ones, will be able to sit through the days of cold and scarcity until Spring and remember the big party and all that fun and food, and maybe that psychological edge will have survival value.

We celebrate the summer solstice, too. When we can, we go to a high place with a good view and hold

\*Calgary, but to *us* it was "far north."

\*\*Perhaps one of our readers might be able to send Cia a copy!

a vigil all night, watching the sun swing round to the north, the long twilight, and it never gets all the way dark, and the long, gradual dawn. Ravens often seem to figure in this. Midsummer celebrations are traditionally riotous; I don't know why ours are generally fairly quiet and meditative. It is somewhat awe-inspiring (in the older, quasi-religious sense) to be out on a high ride with all that sky and space swinging around you. There's a carol for that, probably really a May-day carol, that goes, "I've been a-wandering all the night, and the best part of the day."

The Wyrd Sisters, a group from Winnipeg, have a beautiful new winter solstice carol that we are learning. It's available on their recording **Leave a Little Light**, from Oh Yah! Records, PO Box 26062, 116 Sherbrook Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 4K9.

Cheers,  
Cia Gadd

*Cia Gadd is a sculptor and naturalist living in Jasper, Alberta. Her husband, Ben, with whom Cia developed these solstice customs, is the author of the Handbook of the Canadian Rockies. Cia, who assisted Ben in this endeavour, left her spirit in many of its pages and her picture on the cover.*